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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000739

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DRUZE LEADER ARSLAN READYING FOR THE NEW
CABINET

REF: A. BEIRUT 729
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 618
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 652
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 664

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Druze leader and opposition-aligned former minister and MP Talal Arslan, while avoiding specifics, predicted to the Charge on May 21 that the new president (presumably Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman) will likely choose the Minister of Interior, and that the next LAF Commander will be a focal point for the majority and opposition. Having spent the previous day in Damascus, Arslan told us that Syria was eager for a deal to be made in Doha.

[1](#)2. (C) Recounting the May 11 fighting between Hizballah and Druze rival Walid Jumblatt, Arslan described his mediation efforts in brokering a ceasefire, and said he did not expect future clashes. Hizballah's weapons cannot be discussed until there is a peace agreement with Israel, Arslan asserted. An admirer of American democracy, George Washington University graduate Arslan requested that the U.S. export its system of checks and balances to Lebanon. End summary.

[1](#)3. (C) On May 20, the Charge, accompanied by EmbOffs, met with March 8 Druze leader Talal Arslan at his residence in southern Beirut. Former minister Marwan Abu Fadl and Dr. Saleem Hamadeh, nephew of Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh (who is allied with rival Druze leader Walid Jumblatt) and member of Arslan's Lebanese Democratic Party, also attended.

PREDICTING CABINET
DESIGNATIONS

[1](#)4. (C) In anticipation of an imminent presidential election, Arslan said he expected "major" discussions between the majority and opposition on which side will fill certain ministerial posts, specifically, the Interior, Defense, Finance, Justice, and Foreign Affairs ministries. Arslan reasoned that if the majority wants to choose the next Defense Minister, then the opposition will demand that it

select the Interior Minister.

15. (C) He also paired the Foreign Ministry with Finance, as well as Justice with Telecommunications, arguing that the majority will select one of the pair and the opposition will select the other. (Comment: We got the distinct impression that Arslan is angling for a ministerial post in the next Cabinet. End comment.)

16. (C) He reported that he heard the new president will choose the Minister of Interior, and that it would not be current Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr. Regarding the debate over the Ministry of Defense, Arslan predicted that the political leaders would focus more on selecting the next Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander. He said he heard current head of LAF G-2 (military intelligence) BG Georges Khoury was a likely candidate, adding that he also heard LAF BG Jean Kahwagi's name mentioned. Mount Lebanon G-2 Colonel Joseph Njeim, could replace Khoury as head of the LAF G-2, he suggested.

OK FINE, I WENT TO SYRIA!

17. (C) Discussing the differences between the Syrian and Lebanese Druze, Arslan said that he shared the same "political leanings" as the Druze in Syria and the Golan Heights. Arslan explained that the Druze in Syria (numbering 450,000 compared to 160,000 in Lebanon) are more traditional and nationalistic. He told us that the Druze in Syria "are very angry with Jumblatt," reportedly believing he has

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departed from Druze traditions. Arslan added that he is respected in Syria.

18. (C) In response to the Charge's question, Arslan acknowledged that he was in Syria the previous day. He explained that he has a "friendly relationship" with Syrian President Bashar Assad's family (while avoiding mentioning the president himself). Arslan relayed that "they" in Syria were very anxious for a deal to be made in Qatar and for a solution to Lebanon's political impasse (Ref A). "They did not want anyone to leave Doha with empty hands," he said.

DISAPPROVAL OF
CABINET'S DECISIONS

19. (C) Criticizing the Siniora government, Arslan stated that the Cabinet "exposed" the opposition to Israel when it decided to transfer the head of airport security and declare Hizballah's fiber optics network illegal (Ref B). He faulted Siniora for taking an unprecedented step in taking these decisions, explaining that although the opposition considers the Siniora government as illegitimate, it does not react with such strong measures. He argued that a government based on confessional balance requires certain stability factors, and the Cabinet's decision upset this stability.

110. (C) He further commented that the Siniora government is unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of an opposition group, and has tried to rule alone for the last two years. He noted that his party, Lebanese Democratic Party, is composed of multiple religions, indicating Abu Fadl, who is Greek Orthodox and Hamadeh, who is Druze.

MEDIATING BETWEEN
JUMBLATT AND HIZBALLAH

111. (C) Providing background into how the clashes between Hizballah and Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) began (Ref C), Arslan said that Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah did "not want to go to the mountains (to fight)." He mentioned that before the clashes in the

mountains began on May 11, Nasrallah had asked Arslan to mediate between Jumblatt and Hizballah, adding that Jumblatt made the same request to Arslan the following day. (Note: We reported in Ref D that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri told us he mediated the conflict between Jumblatt and Hizballah. End note.)

¶12. (C) Arslan speculated that if Jumblatt had accepted what Arslan was proposing on May 11 (NFI), the fighting could have been avoided. Acknowledging Berri's involvement, Arslan told us he urged Berri to pressure Jumblatt into agreeing to a ceasefire. Arslan expressed his surprise that Jumblatt's PSP fighters engaged with Hizballah, because he said Jumblatt became concerned "after seeing Beirut taken over in three hours."

¶13. (C) Rejecting his role as a "go-between," Arslan insisted to us that while he accepted the role, he is part of the opposition. He stated that his very participation in the opposition enabled him to announce the ceasefire between Jumblatt's PSP fighters and Hizballah on May 11. Arslan added that he was in contact with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman to ensure the deployment of the LAF to the Chouf mountains. "As soon as the LAF arrived, the opposition withdrew," he stated.

¶14. (C) Arslan credited the division of the Druze as useful when resolving conflicts, saying, "If the Druze were not divided in two groups, who would have resolved the fighting in the Chouf?" (Note: He dismissed the relevance of third Druze leader Wiam Wahhab, claiming he is not significant and is merely used by Hizballah "for his loud voice." End note.) Having received Jumblatt right before he traveled to Doha for the National Dialogue, Arslan told us that Jumblatt does not have any designs (or abilities) to fight Hizballah again.

CONFLICT IS POLITICAL,
NOT SECTARIAN

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¶15. (C) Telling us that he had visited Druze and Shia villages, accompanied by more than 60 Druze sheikhs on May 18, Arslan suggested that the conflict was political in nature, not sectarian. He argued that he would not have been able to make such a trip if there were sectarian strife. He added that he was received as a "savior" by the people in these villages.

HIZBALLAH'S WEAPONS DEPEND
ON PEACE WITH ISRAEL

¶16. (C) "Any solution regarding Hizballah's weapons cannot come from inside of Lebanon," Arslan asserted, "and is contingent upon a peace agreement with Israel." He noted that Hizballah's military prowess exceeds that of the LAF, and therefore the GOL cannot take on Hizballah's weapons. Further, he said, he has been telling the U.S. for two years that Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, March 14/Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, and Jumblatt are "do not have the ability to deliver" on Hizballah's arms.

¶17. (C) Arslan posited that any discussion of Hizballah's arms now would lead to civil war. He suggested that when a regional deal is being discussed, the Hizballah's weapons will be on the table. The way to ensure the security of our country, he continued, is through political, tactical approaches. Nevertheless, he said, "I accept Hizballah's weapons today because Israel can threaten me at any moment."

¶18. (C) According to Arslan, the U.S. is best positioned to be the "godfather" for Lebanon, explaining that the more successful the U.S. is with its regional goals, the more Lebanon is protected. At that point, he suggested,

Hizballah's weapons could be on the table.

U.S. SHOULD EXPORT ITS
"CHECKS AND BALANCES"

¶19. (C) Arslan cautioned the Charge against putting too many expectations on the LAF because, "They won't be able to deliver. Without a political agreement, the LAF structure cannot hold." Having attended George Washington University as a Political Science major undergraduate, Arslan opined, "I wish the U.S. would export its 'checks and balances' system to Lebanon. Lebanon will not become a real state without developing a similar system. Save us from this mess!"

¶20. (C) He said that without a real democracy, Lebanon will continue as it is today. He told us he compared Lebanese and American governments for his undergraduate thesis, and believes that there should be a similar system in Lebanon where the religious communities make up the Senate, and the Parliament is then freed for open, national elections. "Today," he said, "all religions have established a state within a state. It is just more obvious with the Shia community!"

HOPING FOR POSITIVE
RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.

¶21. (C) Telling the Charge that his family is well-liked by the Christians (implying that the Jumblatts are less so), Arslan said he hopes for the "best possible relationship with the USG." He said he is dismayed when he believes the USG is "closer to others." He told the Charge, "There are a lot of lies in Lebanese politics, and these lies cause most of our disasters. Sometimes, the truth doesn't reach you. I want to be a guardian of truth for the United States."

SISON